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Andrew Crozier: Poet and poets' champion

Wednesday, 16 April 2008

At just 20 years old, the poet Andrew Crozier began to nurture and revitalise – through his small-press publishing – a rich terrain of first American, then British, modernist poetry. This had a rapid effect for his peers, principally those associated with the Cambridge School. Crozier disseminated, circulated and, with what became an increasingly anonymous generosity, encouraged and stimulated countless writers and visual artists. If he partly achieved this as an editor, archivist, publisher and teacher, it was quietly reflective of his precise gift as a poet.

Now his poetry is out of print. He appears to have doggedly evaded overtures from publishers keen to restore and increase his work to the public eye. Yet he leaves behind a body of work, with its frequent reference to domestic detail and complex grammatical structure, which will remain a significant part of British poetry. He helped circulate the writings of Douglas Oliver and Robin Blaser, Carl Rakosi and John Rodker. Many of the books he edited at his Ferry Press (named after the Woolwich transport), as well as his own volumes, featured the work of artists such as Tom Phillips, Ian Tyson, Patrick Caulfield and Michael Craig-Martin.

Andrew Crozier's father, Hepple Crozier, of reiver descent, was a historian and college lecturer in London, detailed as an army engineer during the Second World War. His mother, Kathleen, was a secondary school teacher who taught art and practised print-making, pottery and painting (Andrew's younger brother is the painter Philip Crozier). Andrew was born in 1943 in Little Gaddesden, Hertfordshire to where she and her pupils had been evacuated.

The boys' childhood was divided between New Eltham, in south-east London, and Hastings, East Sussex. Crozier obtained a scholarship to Dulwich College in 1954. His ken for archaeology, and membership of the Young Socialists, opened up the arteries of Greater London to him.

In 1961 Crozier won an exhibition to Christ's College, Cambridge to read English. He was arrested twice for civil disobedience on the CND Aldermaston demonstrations; a photograph of Crozier on the cover of International Socialist Review was widely syndicated. By 1964 he was tutoring students in Elizabethan poetry as a teaching fellow at Gonville and Caius.

Crozier founded Ferry Press in London in 1964. The first book was Thread, by the Black Mountain writer Fielding Dawson, whose collage graced the cover. That autumn he went to the State University of New York, Buffalo on a Fulbright Scholarship. There he published the broadsheet series Sum and the journal The Ant's Forefoot, and was tutored by the poet Charles Olson. While in America he also published his debut collection, Loved Litter of Time Spent (1967), which includes the poem "Some Other Occasion":

Goodbye Goodbye

I am coming back, Mother

standing on the dock

I am crying

to see you there

the ship drawing out

I am coming back

I am crying

almost

wondering

When shall I leave?

Crozier had accumulated a large dossier on the poetry of Rakosi; a revenant from the American poetic movement the Objectivists who had long ceased writing poetry. When he wrote to Rakosi in 1965, Crozier had no impulse other than to sleuth for a man who had published only sparingly and had even changed his name. His letter released Rakosi from silence – and he continued to write and publish for the rest of his life.

Crozier realised that with a sensibility as English as his own, he couldn't create a postscript to Black Mountain, so he left America and came home. He turned his attention instead to British poetry, founding the journal The English Intelligence. The first edition appeared in January 1966.

That year he met the poet John James, whom he would publish, and at James's Cambridge flat, would meet Jean Lewis, whom he later married. James characterises the city then as still having "a Bohemian feel, with the Criterion and US service personnel and the Mayo mafia and Mad Willy the All Ireland accordionist and Cambridge art school wild men everywhere." The English Intelligencer was run off a mimeo machine by the poet J.H. Prynne "in a sort of cupboard in his rooms at Gonville and Caius," recalls James. "This had a strong sense of the subversive and making it new with what was available, and immediately to hand. You wrote for it. It was a big part of the ether."

That autumn Donald Davie, Professor of English at Essex University, invited Crozier to take up a lectureship at Essex. Here he began his PhD on prosody and founded a new periodical, The Wivenhoe Park Review. A year later Crozier became Lecturer in American Studies at another new university, Keele, and shortened the journal's title to The Park. (Keele was built in parkland.)

Here Crozier flourished. He believed literature was best taught by conversation, not by lecturing. His head-down pithy delivery left the intelligent something to be interested in. He and Jean lived in Burslem, in the Potteries, close to the painter Arthur Berry, reporting his enthusiasms back to the poet Roy Fisher at Keele. Ferry Press continued to expose Crozier's poetry and the poetry he liked: Chris Tarrant, Wendy Mulford, Douglas Oliver and John Temple.

Crozier left Keele in 1973 to take up a lectureship in English and American Studies at Sussex University. He wanted to avoid a full identification with American poetry, and edited a group of English poets for a New Directions journal in 1976. In 1974 his mysterious The Veil Poem was published by Burning Deck in America. "This is / the ordinary world, naturally incomplete and / in no wise to be verbally separated / from your picture of it. / For words are the wise man's counters, they do but / reckon with them, but they are the money / of fools."

In the late 1970s, Crozier was deeply touched by punk, the fanzines and the concerts. The DIY ethos of recording and distribution gelled with his poetry world. The following decade he began to scrutinise the work of the New Apocalypse, the generation of British poets suppressed by the

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